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ARTICLE

A Critique of Our Own? On Intersectionality and "Epistemic Habits" in a Study of Racialization and Homonationalism in a Nordic Context

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how debates regarding intersectionality enable self-reflexitivity, positionality and critique, but also risk becoming routinized gestures in activist and academic settings. Through reflections on the notions of *epistemic habits* and *epistemic whiteness*, the article discusses key critiques of intersectional analysis, such as tendencies to re-centre whiteness, as a methodological concern. To illuminate the argument, I consider an example from a research project a colleague and I conducted on racialization and homonationalism in LGBTIQ activist work in a Finnish context, which brought up the question of whether our analysis reinforced or challenged whiteness. The aim of this article is to reflect on how intersectionality is a crucial concept for feminist knowledge production while also attending to and problematizing some presuppositions, that are routinely repeated as self-evident starting points in intersectionality research.

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Intersectionality; whiteness; racialization; homonationalism; reflexivity; epistemic habit

1. Introduction

Intersectionality is, arguably, one of the most-debated concepts, methodologies and theories in contemporary academic feminism. Intersectionality has come to represent both the failures and successes of feminist theory and research as well as its political imaginaries. The discussion around the uses and misuses of the concept concerns the grammar of feminism, and the field's attachments, affects, aspirations, desires and imaginaries in the stories we tell (Hemmings, 2011; Ilmonen, 2020; Lewis, 2013; Nash, 2019; Wiegman, 2012). Intersectionality scholarship makes visible the internal dynamics of academic feminism, its political investments, conflicts and disagreements. Robyn Wiegman writes that a key aspect of the ways in which feminist research and gender studies have come to understand their own task as a critical field is through a commitment to analyse their own "appropriations and complicities" in ways that perform the field as "a political agency" (Wiegman, 2016, p. 89). Being self-reflective regarding one's methodological and theoretical choices, and their presuppositions, is a cornerstone in feminist research and activism. As feminist reading and writing practices partake in racialized and gendered power formations, attention to situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991) and the kind of politics put forward in the name of feminism has become a key concern for the field. While intersectionality is a key concept in feminist academia, the literature on the concept also reflects the disciplinary demand that feminism be self-reflective and self-critical. A vast portion of the literature on intersectionality concerns various forms of criticism of its applications—displaying a critique of our own (Ilmonen, 2020; Nash, 2019).

In 2013, Maria Carbin and Sara Edenheim noted that, from "being a sign of threat and conflict to (white) feminism", intersectionality had become a celebrated concept in Nordic feminist research, indicating a consensus regarding its usefulness (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013, p. 234).

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In the same year, however, US-based scholar Barbara Tomlinson analysed the work of several critics of intersectionality who, in her reading, put forward "destructive critiques of intersectionality that are damaging to feminist antisubordination scholarship and activism" (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 993, on the role of "the critic" in intersectionality debates, see Nash, 2019, pp. 33–80). In her analysis of feminist rhetoric on intersectionality at what she calls "the scene of argument", Tomlinson (2013) suggests that meta-level argumentation risks distancing intersectionality from its roots in social justice activism and the experiences of women of colour. Carbin and Edenheim, on the other hand, write that although intersectionality has become *the* feminist theory, intersectionality scholarship needs to clarify its theoretical presuppositions, and argue that "the very concept itself implies a certain ontology that cannot be overlooked without giving cause to theoretical confusion" (2013, p. 234).

The "meta-theoretical" discussions concerning whether intersectionality is best thought of as "a theory", "a framework", "a theory of marginalization", "a theory of identity", a "nodal point", "a perspective" or "a method" have been criticized for causing theoretical confusion. They have been faulted for "confining intersectionality to an overly academic contemplative exercise" with no empirical connection, and for failing to address interrelated forms of oppression as a matter of social justice (De los Reyes, Molina, & Mulinari, 2003; Bilge, 2013; see also: Crenshaw, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013; Collins, 2015; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Moi, 2017, p. 104; Carbin & Edenheim, 2013, pp. 235–238). Despite the useful reminder of how academic and activist work might differ, I suggest that these "meta-theoretical" discussions are nevertheless needed in order to reflect on what we mean when we speak of and use the concept of intersectionality as activists and academics, and to reflect on questions related to its applications in various contexts.

Despite the apparent, different critical perspectives on intersectionality, most scholars share an understanding of how claims of intersectionality are articulated within a field of argumentation constituted by power (Collins, 2015; Egeland & Gressgård, 2007; Nash, 2019; Tomlinson, 2013). The claims that power is constitutive of all subjects and that feminist discourses function as technologies of power can be read as key authorizing gestures in the fields of gender and feminist research, indicative of an understanding of the political nature of all knowledge production. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, writes that intersectionality's "particular definitional dilemma" is that "it participates in the very power relations that it examines" (2015, p. 3). Therefore, she argues, attention to the presuppositions of knowledge claims made in the name of intersectionality is required. In an article on the theory, applications and praxis of intersectionality, Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams and Leslie McCall suggest that intersectionality is an *analytic disposition*. It is a way of thinking that is not determined by the use of the word "intersectionality" or by referencing standard citations in the literature. An intersectional analysis, they write, is "an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power", and suggest that intersectionality, as a theory and praxis "neither travels outside nor is unmediated by the very field of race and gender power that it interrogates" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). These reminders to pay attention to the knowledge claims put forward in the name of intersectionality do not only concern the question of power in general, but are also related to another central theme in the debates on the ethics, politics and practices of intersectionality: namely, the concern of how race and racism through epistemologies of ignorance operate in feminism, both inside and outside of academia.

The literature on the ways in which intersectionality has been "colonized", "commodified" or "appropriated" by white feminisms has shown how intersectionality debates themselves enact a politics of inclusion and exclusion, and how epistemic whiteness works, despite the proclamations of a self-critical academic feminism (Nash, 2019). Challenging, disrupting and actively undoing the epistemic whiteness of Nordic feminism in relation to intersectionality is thus a key concern (Lykke, 2020). This requires an engagement with and undoing of those tendencies in Nordic feminism that render whiteness, race and racialization invisible, but also an analysis of the tools that are used in challenging those tendencies. Otherwise, the criticism of how whiteness operates risks serving the

subject positions of dominant white feminisms, and is reduced to a form of "feel-good anti-racism" (Cuesta & Mulinari, 2018).

In this article I discuss how the commitment to self-reflection, the insight that power saturates all research, and the risk of re-centring whiteness unfolded in a previous research project conducted with a colleague on homonationalism in Finnish and Swedish LGBTIQ activism (Peltonen & Jungar, 2018). The initial project asked how processes of racialization, gender, age, nationality and sexuality intersect in forming cultural understandings of "the self" and "others". When writing our field notes from a panel discussion about LGBTIQ refugees at a Pride event in Finland, the question of whether our writing reinforced or challenged whiteness emerged (Peltonen & Jungar, 2018). Did our writing, in its attempt to challenge whiteness, in fact reinforce white epistemologies? Drawing on this empirical example, I reflect on how the question of analysing one's own appropriations and complicities, in this case me and my and colleague addressing each other's whiteness, in an intersectional analysis became a question of methodological concern. The insight that critical whiteness studies may re-centre whiteness because of its choice of object is a question that has been circulating within the field of feminist, women's and gender studies for decades (Ahmed, 2007; Wekker, 2016; Wiegman, 1999). I argue, as many before me, that this calls for an ongoing, careful examination of moments where it occurs, in order to challenge the habits that reproduce and circulate power relations of race in academia and elsewhere. Being attentive to these tendencies requires asking: "When do accountability and situatedness turn into unnecessary and counter-productive gestures, more efficient in easing white guilt than unravelling racialised power structures in academic writing?" (Kyrölä, 2017).

I discuss this question through two concepts I call *epistemic habits* and *epistemic whiteness*, by which I refer to ways of thinking and modes of engaging with the world that through their habitual nature reproduce power relations. I relate my discussion of epistemic habits and epistemic whiteness to the axiom that intersectionality research participates in the very power relations that it examines, as a key methodological and theoretical concern. This article aims to respond to the following question: Is there a way of thinking differently about intersectionality's definitional dilemma?

Through attending to what Barbara Tomlinson has called *rhetoric at the scene of the argument* (Tomlinson, 2013, 2018) in her analysis of power relations in the writings of feminist researchers, I ask how different presuppositions in intersectionality scholarship might help or hinder to problematize epistemic habits and epistemic whiteness. Tomlinson's close reading of discursive conventions and habits of argument in academic feminist writing attends failures of acknowledging "how our arguments are always already situated within fields of power" (2018, p. 993). In relation to this thematic, I problematize ways of analysing and understanding "intersectionality's definitional dilemma" that rely on what Toril Moi calls *theoreticism*—"the idea that theoretical correctness somehow guarantees political correctness" (Moi, 1999, p. 59). Considering questions of complicity and power as a result of an analysis, not as a presupposition saturating all cases, encounters and descriptions in research, requires more work, of course. It requires keeping in mind that feminist thought ought to "remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism" (Butler, 1990, pp. 18–19). Finally, I propose that there might be a need to rethink the way power and complicity are envisioned, not only within intersectional research, but within the field of feminist and gender research more broadly. In this article I do not explicitly discuss research on racialization and homonationalism in the Nordic context, but focus on methodological questions raised in an extract from a previously published joint article (Peltonen & Jungar, 2018). I do not claim that this example stands in for all cases where the question or risk of reinforcing whiteness occurs. However, I see it as an illuminating example of the larger problematic of habitual or routinized ways of thinking that reinforce power relations and racialization in feminist research—what Gloria Wekker in her criticism of how identification works subconsciously and therefore reproduces racialized power relations calls the problem of lazy identification patterns (Wekker, 2016, p. 170).

2. Epistemic habits, epistemic whiteness and complicity

The concept of complicity, significant in feminist postcolonial theorizing, has in the Nordic context been used to describe the ways in which countries such as Finland have assumed an ambiguous "outsider" status in discussions of colonialism, by virtue of not having had overseas colonies. It also concerns Nordic participation in colonialism in the Arctic, and as a concept should be complemented with decolonial perspectives on intra-Nordic power relations, as suggested by Sámi and other indigenous scholars (Keskinen, 2019; Knobblock & Kuokkanen, 2015). The concept of "colonial complicity" illuminates the processes of being implicated in a history of slavery and colonialism, through participation in practices of difference making and oppression via cultural representation and knowledge production (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, & Mulinari, 2009). Complicity here refers to the processes through which "our minds were 'colonised' into an acceptance of colonial projects" (Vuorela, 2009, p. 21). The notion of complicity is also key to postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak's work, surfacing in her take on deconstruction as an interrogation of how truths and knowledges are produced. A critical inquiry into the discourses one interrogates involves, as she phrases it, "a persistent critique of what one cannot not want" (Spivak, 1996, pp. 27–28). Spivak's remarks concern how scholarly ambitions tacitly might reflect colonial mindsets, and highlights therefore how a critical approach requires an analysis of the epistemic habits that saturate feminist academic work.

In speaking of *epistemic habits*, I have in mind particular theoretical understandings that are referenced habitually, similarly to what Sara Ahmed has described as routinized theoretical gestures, that "become a background, something taken for granted as a common reference point such that it is not noticeable, and hence has not really been engaged with as involving a specific set of claims" (2008, p. 25). She references both key literature within feminist theory and an impression "that has accumulated over time" in conversations with friends, colleagues and participants at conferences (2008, p. 25). In a similar way to Ahmed (2008), Wiegman (2012), and Hemmings (2011), I understand epistemic habits as not "just" a matter of *what* we learn as we become enculturated within a particular academic climate or style, but also as a concern about *how* we think about what we learn (Liljeström & Peltonen, 2017). Habits are, of course, not in themselves either good or bad, but can become troublesome obstacles, excluding other ways of thinking, as much as they can spur fruitful dialogue. The question that interests me here is when do habits become constrictive, or even counter-productive?

My use of the term *epistemic whiteness* is influenced by various descriptions of the ways in which racialized, embodied practices tacitly inform our ways of knowing and understanding the world (Wekker, 2016). I understand the concept of racialization to not only concern how bodies and subjectivities are racialized through processes of othering, cultural signification and social structures, but to include ways in which "race is present in a shadowlike existence 'between the lines' and 'in the air'", and how whiteness "works", and functions as the unspoken norm (Hvenegård-Lassen & Staunæs, 2020, p. 1; Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017, p. 65). In speaking of epistemic whiteness, I have in mind the way in which processes of racialization come to function as a mode of preunderstanding that illuminates how this unspoken norm works and the kind of understanding it entails. The term is also inspired by Ahmed's suggestion that "whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions" indicative of how colonialism has shaped and shapes the world of whiteness and "white" ways of thinking (2007, p. 150). Ahmed focuses on the performativity of whiteness (what it does) but is also aware of a challenge to this work:

> We could say that any project that aims to dismantle or challenge the categories that are made invisible through privilege is bound to participate in the object of its critique. We might even expect such projects to fail, and be prepared to witness this failure as productive. And yet, we can get stuck in this position, endlessly caught up in describing what we are doing to whiteness, rather than what whiteness is doing (2007, pp. 149–150).

Inspired by Ahmed, my concern in this article regards how academic feminism might end up reinforcing the very dynamics it sets out to contest, due to particular theoretical presuppositions of how power, race or whiteness "work". I argue that this tendency in itself can be interpreted as an "epistemic habit" that white feminisms, in their uneasiness in dealing with race and racism, are prone to repeat.

3. Debating and narrating intersectionality

The way in which epistemic whiteness has functioned in feminist discussions of intersectionality is a central thematic in the assessments of feminist narratives around intersectionality. Sirma Bilge argues that intersectionality has been de-politized through neoliberalism and a whitening of the concept in ways that re-centre Eurocentric epistemologies. Tomlinson, writing in the context of US academia, suggests that European feminisms' managing of intersectionality "reinscribe[s] racial dominance *at the scene of argument* … As a result, the subject position of the white woman tends to be unmarked within its own discourse, but visible to those it seeks to manage" (Tomlinson, 2018, pp. 147–48; see also: Bilge, 2017; Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). This tendency has also been highlighted as a problem in Nordic feminist research on intersectionality. In the context of Nordic feminist academia, intersectionality entered the debates through postcolonial feminisms (De los Reyes, Molina, & Mulinari, 2002) analysing and problematizing processes of nationalism and racialization, and in studying how sexuality, gender, race and class are co-constructed and intersect. Intersectionality has, in particular, functioned as a call to address racist practices within academic feminism and to avoid practices of exclusion within feminist thought and research (De los Reyes et al., 2002). However, it has also been criticized for signposting an awareness of intersecting categories without actually speaking about race or racialization in more detail (Bilge, 2013; Lykke, 2020).

Early writings on intersectionality in the Nordic context in the 2000s (De los Reyes et al., 2002; De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Lykke, 2003) were part of a discussion concerning white feminisms' failures in addressing discussions of race, ethnicity and migration. But the concept was also introduced as way to deal with and manage the tensions and anxiety that the criticism caused (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013, p. 244), which in itself can be seen as a habitual response of white feminisms in the face of accusations of racism. The concept has since been established in Nordic feminist research, not only for analysing how "class, race and gender" intersect, but recently also developed in relation to feminist pedagogy and indigenous studies, and feminist new materialisms, taking intersectionality into concerns beyond anthropocentrism (Laukkanen, Miettinen, Elonheimo, Ojala, & Saresma, 2018; Olsen, 2018; Tiainen, Leppänen, Kontturi, & Mehrabi, 2020).

Intersectionality has taken differing routes within various geopolitical contexts, a thematic that in itself has spurred debate around the contextual situatedness of the concept. The meaning and genealogy of the term, as well as its roots in black feminism, have been much debated. While the concept's rootedness in the US context, foregrounding black feminist theory and analyses of racialization and racism, is usually highlighted, in the uptake of intersectionality in the European context, the role of race—or rather, the lack of engagement with race—has been a key criticism (Lewis, 2013; Bilge, 2013, 2014). Despite the fact that reminders of intersectionality's roots in black feminism have been problematized as a "routinized gesture" that risks reducing black feminisms to intersectionality, it should be kept in mind, as Kaisa Ilmonen writes, that "it would be unethical to obscure intersectionality's relationship to its conceptual home in black feminism" (2020, p. 255).

"[T]he fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking", as formulated by the Combahee River Collective (1977/1982), received an umbrella term when intersectionality entered academic feminist debates, particularly though the uptake of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work. Through various analyses of the politics of feminist storytelling, scholars such as Jennifer Nash, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge have in various ways attended to the tendency of telling what Gail Lewis describes as a "well-rehearsed story" (2013, p. 871), of citing Crenshaw coining the term intersectionality, (although she *did* introduce the term as an intervention in legal studies). The well-

rehearsed gesture, which can be characterized as an "epistemic habit", involves citing just one African American woman to situate the term's origins in black feminism, despite a broader archive of work analysing overlapping forms of oppression in various ways. The ambivalence of this narrative is seen in relation to the broader tendencies of the politics of citation in feminist academia. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the narrative "fosters a collective ritual that legitimates this particular origin story" in ways that often disregard the diversity of Crenshaw's work, reflecting a larger lack of engagement with black feminist work in academic feminism (Collins, 2015, p. 10; Carasthatis, 2014; Collins & Bilge, 2016). Jennifer Nash, positioned as one of the "critics" in the debate, suggests that this tendency to "originalism" functions as a deflection from attention to non-identitarian work in black feminism and "the myriad of political traditions that have long been part of black feminism, but that are often ignored because of the extent of intersectionality's institutionalization" (Nash, 2011, p. 5, 2019). This self-critical work thus shows how analyses of intersectionality are needed in order to break with the tendencies that uphold a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Nash has also shown how intersectionality debates have fostered a story of "villains" and "saviors", where "black feminism's primary task is to discipline so-called white feminism and women's studies" on the one hand, producing a defensiveness that "hinders black feminism's theoretical and political imagination rather than unleashing it" on the other (2019, pp. 136–137). In calling to animate black feminist thought, Nash (2019, pp. 35, 73, 130–131) suggests "letting go" of the kind of politics that defensively makes the term into property to be guarded. Nash's analysis of how the grammar of intersectionality operates in the field reveals both reductive and stagnating tendencies. But Nash' analysis also highlights how the politics of citation and representation of intersectionality matter, as an affective, ethical and political practice. This calls for a growing awareness and analyses of some deep-rooted, well-established, and sometimes almost self-evident epistemic habits that reside within feminist thinking. Many of these epistemic habits are related to ideas and understandings of critical feminist thinking in both academic feminist and activist contexts. One example is the presence of inclusive/universalist reasoning despite continuous highlighting of the importance of differences and diversity of identities, and the tendency to emphasize the power relations implicit in all scholarly writing (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Egeland & Gressgård, 2007; Tomlinson, 2018).

This thematic has in the Nordic context of intersectionality also fostered a meta-theoretical discussion around its epistemological implications. Intersectionality's ability to analyse complexity and difference has been framed particularly in relation to poststructuralist feminisms (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013; Lykke, 2011; Karkulehto et al., 2012; Staunaes, 2003). Egeland and Gressgård (2007), for example, argue that intersectionality research in its desire to manage the complexity of social life assumes a problematic realist epistemology. They suggest intersectionality research is spurred by a "will to empower" marginalized subjects, ignoring "the 'will to power' inherent in *all* knowledge production and politics", and suggest that intersectionality research instead reproduces reductionist thinking of identity, which is something feminist research should problematize (2007, p. 217). Intersectionality research, they argue, assumes the existence of categories in analysing social complexities, rather than questioning the construction of these categories and what is meant by "complexity" in intersectional analyses in the first place. Carbin and Edenheim (2013) in a similar manner suggest that intersectionality is characterized by a refusal to engage in poststructuralist and postcolonial anti-foundational perspectives:

> It may be that poststructuralism, as it is defined within intersectionality research, is rather used as a general symbol of a multidimensional, nuanced and complex view on power; a perspective that brings to the fore concepts such as differences and complexities, and therefore thought of as somehow needed within the field. Yet, the basic premise of poststructuralism is missing in this inclusion: that of *the fundamental impossibility of accurately representing the world* (2013, p. 243, emphasis added).

Firmly rooted in poststructuralist feminist theory, Carbin and Edenheim suggest that intersectionality is a de-politicized "feminist theory" that provides "an ontology of neither the subject nor

power" (2013, p. 245). For Carbin and Edenheim, intersectionality must be disassociated from poststructuralist, postcolonial feminist thought, the anti-foundationalist approach, and the problematization of difference, identity and subjectivity prevalent in these traditions. Through the ethos of inclusivity, they argue that "conflicts seem to be foreclosed" in debates on intersectionality, as these overlook the "already existing feminism that has worked with issues of power in more than one dimension" (2013, p. 241), thereby suggesting a difference between identitarian frameworks and those disputing them to lie at the heart of a disagreement of how to assess the criticality of intersectionality. But the question becomes whether the indicated distinction between consensus-seeking intersectionality and conflict-acknowledging poststructuralist approaches is really as tenable as is suggested (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). In what follows I discuss how the question of these different epistemologies is related to the question of whether the intersectional analysis and mode of writing in the previously mentioned research project re-centred whiteness.

4. An example: Re-centring whiteness?

In an earlier research project on how categories such as race, gender, age, nationality and sexuality intersect in forming cultural understandings of "the self" and "others" in LGBTIQ activism in Finland, the methodological reflections actualized the question of whether our analysis and writing re-centred whiteness. The extract I analyse here was part of a self-critical dialogue (in the form of field notes) that attempted to critically scrutinize our situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991) and to hold us accountable for our knowledge production, in relation to both activist and academic contexts. In 2016, the event "Turku Pride: Panel debate on LGBTIQ+ sensitivity in the asylum process" was arranged by Amnesty International and the Evangelical Lutheran State Church, during pride week in the city of Turku in Finland. The invited panellists addressed the topic of LGBTIQ asylum seekers and refugees as experts in their various fields, and the discussion centred on different state practices, legal issues, the work of Migri (the Finnish Immigration Service), the health and well-being of refugees, and experiences of refugee work among local churches. The panel did not include anyone with the "expertise" or experience of either being or speaking as a queer refugee or asylum seeker. During the two-hour discussion the panellists invoked several tropes and figures of othering, highlighting problems of different customs and norms regarding gender-based violence, gender politics and cultural understandings and customs of gender equality, in a manner that reinforced images of a "civilized West" and the "uncivilized rest" typical to neonationalist rhetoric in Finland and elsewhere (Keskinen, 2018). The abstract figure of "queer refugees" circulated in the discussion in a manner that reiterated Eurocentric notions of "Muslim cultures" and saviour narratives of saving brown queers from brown hetero-patriarchy, to paraphrase Spivak's analysis of colonial discourses (Jungar & Peltonen, 2015, 2016). The audience was asked not to interrupt during the two-hour-long discussion. Attending the panel was thus utterly frustrating, which I expressed in my field notes.

> The panel is addressing 'LGBTQ refugees' that they know exist in the reception centers, but are silenced by fear, living in fear and often silenced by shame. If only they knew that it is okay to be gay in Finland! It is their right! It is declared in the panel over and over again. I look at the serious expressions on the panel; I listen to the well-meaning words and feel more and more uncomfortable. I think of queer knowledge, of my friends for whom there is no 'safe space', where contemporary Finland, and public space, with its everyday situations, pose a constant threat to their person because they do not pass, because they 'are' genderqueer. I think about my friend who recently was beaten up for being gay. Of how families excluded members and parents who have cut off all ties with their children because they are gay. I think of what would happen if we gathered a crowd of Finns, mostly men, and put them together in a camp—what kind of ambiance and understanding that would prevail there (Peltonen & Jungar, 2018, pp. 62–63).

When my co-author read my notes, she reacted to my use of a logic of similarity in questioning a logic of difference as a risk of centring whiteness. She responded:

> Thank you for sending the text, great work! I however find your reflexive field notes somewhat problematic. I understand where you are coming from and what you are trying to convey, but there is something that troubles me in your notes. You try to deconstruct what they are saying by comparing what they are saying about "Muslim cultures" with Finland. In reaction to white feminism and colonial feminism I have done that a lot myself. Finland for example has the highest statistics of domestic violence in Western Europe, and I have repeatedly brought this up and reacted in situations where a discourse on the violence of men in or from the global South becomes a trope of othering. It kind of works, but it also does not. There is a danger that the issues raised by for example Arab queer activists become less visible in such a discourse (and Finnish queer suffering takes centre stage). At the same time there must be a way of listening to and talking to, for example, refugees, acknowledging the homophobia in other countries without at the same time making Finnish homophobia invisible. This is very much what you are striving to do. The way to do this differently though, is not necessarily by looking for similarities. Similarities are of course interesting but I feel focusing on similarities is a bit risky as the main counter discourse, and paradoxically centres white queer suffering (Peltonen & Jungar, 2018, p. 63).

My field notes, written as a reaction to the imagined construction of Finland in relation to its imagined racialized "other" in the panel discussion, raised the question: Do the notes of the panel in *themselves* problematically centre whiteness through their description of "queer suffering" in a Finnish context? This question is not surprising, as it follows the key axioms of the field: the intersectional analytic of "thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" and the awareness that feminist research, reading, writing and interpretation practices "participates in the very power relations that it examines" (Collins, 2015; Cho et al., 2013, p. 795; Egeland & Gressgård, 2007; Tomlinson, 2018).

In this case, the question concerns how epistemologies of ignorance and epistemic whiteness are revealed in the details of the analysis of how difference and similarities work in the panel in question. Nonetheless, the extract from the field notes can also be read as challenging the power relations they interrogate, in this instance "white" ways of experiencing, knowing and interpreting the world. What interests me, what interests me in analysing this example are the questions: Does the "awareness" of reflecting on our own positionality, through asking the questions of complicity and power, in and of itself articulate a kind of "epistemic habit" in feminist research? Does it "do work" beyond indicating an awareness of the fact that we are not always in control of how our words and thinking, phrasing and analyses are understood and interpreted? What I wish to highlight here is that although the commitment to analysing our own appropriations and complicities is a key axiom in the field—a critique of our own—in acknowledging this "danger" of complicity one might ask, are we not by the same logic *constructing* a problematic setup of complicity? This kind of question is often ascribed to "meta-theory" or described as "writing meta text about metatext" (Ilmonen, 2020, p. 351), but I argue that such reflections are necessary as modes of careful reading and ethical engagement, so as to deepen the understanding of how ways of thinking, based in theory, shape the analytical perspectives we engage with.

5. Identification and disidentification, and habitual workings of whiteness

The field notes written at the panel discussion express my situatedness and positionality vis-à-vis feminist, anti-racist and queer politics in a Finnish context. The field notes were written from the perspective of an intersectional analytic attending to "thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795), in an attempt to make visible how a particular understanding of the world unfolded as "white" in the panel discussion, showing the operation of the white optics Ahmed speaks of as inherited histories that position bodies differently (Ahmed, 2007). Invoking a logic of similarity, applying the panellists' arguments regarding "*our*" (Finnish) culture, I suggest, reveals how "epistemic whiteness" works as routinized and habitual ways of understanding the world. The logic of similarity displays how Finnish exceptionalism and "gay-friendliness" is constructed in the context of the panel discussion through a logic of difference and images of othering, thus erasing Finnish homophobia and homonationalism (Peltonen &

Jungar, 2018, pp. 63–64). The aim is to reveal the kind of orientation of whiteness and identification that enacts a politics of inclusion and exclusion through imagined belongings. It might, however, also be read as an example of the ways in which intersectionality's definitional dilemma becomes articulated, of how one participates in the very power relations that one examines, in risky ways, in this case by re-centring whiteness. Does my description of the violent effects of homonationalism imply I am complicit in the epistemic whiteness my description is aimed to question? Can what happens here be an example of the kind of failure Ahmed speaks of, and if so, can it be productive? Can one read the field notes as an example of reactions and thinking patterns that are habitual, unreflective, "lazy identification patterns" (Wekker, 2016)?

In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Gloria Wekker (2016) uses the term "lazy identification patterns" to refer to how whiteness works at the level of the unconscious in relation to how racism works tacitly, precisely, in the sense of being habitual, routinized responses (Wekker, 2016, pp. 168–173). With the heading "But What about the Captain?", the title of the coda in *White Innocence*, Wekker provides an example of how these lazy identification patterns operate. Wekker describes an event arranged to mark the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch empire, and where Saidiya Hartman read an extract from her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007). Hartman tells the story of an enslaved girl on the ship *Recovery*, being abused by the ship's captain and then brutally killed, and the captain's subsequent acquittal in the murder. After the distressing story of sexual and physical abuse, Wekker writes, "a thick silence settles in the room . . . Before the silence can become uncomfortable, it is broken by a white middle-aged man, who straightforwardly asks, "But what about the captain?" (2016, p. 169). Wekker describes how this man, in breaking the silence, as the first one to speak out by posing *this* question, re-centres whiteness, by *identifying* with the captain, another white man, despite the atrocities he has committed. Wekker elaborates on the politics of consciousness here as a matter of one's positionality in terms of race and gender, but also in relation to questions of entitlement, and shows how this example of identification and disidentification sheds light on the fearful avoidance, aggressive ignorance and entitlement of whiteness, and how it works habitually. "From which frame of mind does such a question emerge?" she asks, writing that his question encapsulates white self-representation and entitlement (2016, p. 169). Our identification patterns are not innocent and often function as collective cultural patterns of racializing ourselves and others. In her analysis, Wekker suggests that perhaps the man in the audience is reaching for "some kind of shared humanity", trying to find an answer, to understand the captain's actions. (The man, N.N, Wekker writes, is a progressive leftist politician of the Labour Party in the Netherlands, known for his support of anti-racist politics). In order to unlearn these kinds of lazy identification patterns, we must bring them into our consciousness and understand our positionality "along the lines of race and gender" as Wekker (2016, p. 171) suggests. In other words, do the work of unlearning, and disidentification.

Reading the notes that express my discomfort regarding the panel discussion in the light of Wekker's discussion of habitual identifications brings up the question of *why* and *how* my emotions play into my interpretation. Despite the different examples here (my co-author's reaction to my writing and the man asking about the captain), both indicate the need for suspending one's judgement in order to achieve change in responding to racialized patterns—one's own, and those displayed by others. Perhaps my counter-description can be interpreted as an instance of "epistemic whiteness" not dissimilar to the man's reaction in Wekker's example. In suggesting a similarity in experiences of heteronormativity and the effects of how differences are made in the name of sexuality and identity, in general, there is a risk, as suggested by my co-author, of erasing the importance of contextualizing differences when it comes to degrees of violence and "gay-friendliness" in different contexts. On this reading, the way in which a politics of similarity and difference plays itself out in my field notes follows a general epistemic habit of whiteness to re-centre itself. The "failure" on this reading, is not articulating a complex enough picture of the counter-discourse I attempt to provide. However, the claim that "white queer suffering" risks taking

centre stage through invoking an example of what Sarah Schulman (2009) has called familial homophobia, on the other hand, seems only to work if the assumption *a priori* is that *any* description of "queer suffering" in a Finnish context *will* re-centre whiteness. This move implicitly equates Finnish or Finnish-queer with whiteness, in a way that essentializes the dynamics of power relations in problematic ways.

Following the axiomatic thinking Wiegman describes in relation to the commitment of feminist research to analyse its own appropriations and complicities and Hill Collins's definition of intersectionality's definitional dilemma, critique *is* focused on emphasizing exclusion, on normalizing power, on historical complicity and on acknowledging a violent imposition of a racialized order, as my colleague's remarks highlight. My description *can* therefore be interpreted as bearing a similarity to the epistemic habit of writing in a way that forecloses brown experiences and activism, not dissimilar to the ways in which citation practices in intersectionality scholarship reduce black feminism to the concept of intersectionality. One might also suggest that my writing tacitly assumes a particular Finnish masculinity to represent racist, homophobic structures of oppression, ignoring an analysis of "Finnish men" as an intersectional category as well as the fact that women have a prominent role in white nationalist far-right activities in Finland (Keskinen, 2018). Although my notes responding to the language of identity through a logic of similarity were written as critical remarks on the panellists' understanding of "homosexual" and "lesbian refugees" in terms of identity, the language of the state practices in Finland (Migri), and the tacit role whiteness played in the panellists' speech, my notes perhaps fail to communicate this thought, if the description in itself is seen as essentializing these terms or categories.

My writing can also, however, be an example of understanding that the categories we live with (even if unthinkingly) *are* already intersectional in nature, that we are not walking and talking essences of whiteness, womanhood, heterosexuality, queerness or Finnishness. In other words, there must be ways to critique the intersection of nationalism, gender, sexuality and racialization, and use categories in ways that, while describing the workings of epistemic whiteness, do not reinforce what they set out to critique. Therefore, to see a similarity between cases and forms of oppression is also an acknowledgement of how intersectional analyses work in revealing interrelated forms of oppression (in this case gender and sexuality are in focus). The suggestion that whiteness again takes centre stage is important to consider and is a critical remark on the politics of knowledge production in feminist academia and activism. But, it *can* also become a *generalizing* gesture that ignores the particularities of the context. In the case of the panel discussion at the pride event, epistemic whiteness was centred, and there must be possibilities of making this visible, "looking into how truths are produced" (Spivak, 1996, pp. 27–28) and to describe this process, without it necessarily enacting a politics of exclusion.

6. Re-assessing the critique of what one cannot not want

If we take the question of complicity seriously, highlighting (Arab or other) queer activism doesn't necessarily omit the problematic of homonationalism. However, it complicates the question of what criteria to reference regarding who gets to speak, for whom and on what terms (Alcoff, 1991). Feminist reading and writing are political practices, in acknowledging one's positionality and implicatedness in racialized power relations. Could I have responded otherwise in my writing and critical remarks, and what would those alternative responses have been?

Instead of focusing on similarities in the everyday lives of queers in different contexts (suggesting a queer commons?), I could have highlighted the way in which the panel, in suggesting Finnish sexual exceptionalism, is an example and expression of an imperialist logic, part of a larger shift in a neoliberal context. Puar writes that "[a]s such, homonationalism is not a synonym for gay racism, rather a deep critique of liberal attachments to identity and rights-based discourses that rely on identitarian formations" (Puar, quoted in Schotten, 2016, p. 359). As the criticism of the panel is about homonationalist tendencies in LGBTIQ work, the content of the panel could be analysed

through the various uses of "homonationalism", analysing the logic of sexual exceptionalism, "queer as regulatory" (Puar, 2007), or the ascendency of whiteness (Chow, 2000), using a more "technical" vocabulary, distancing myself from the vernacular of identity that the panellists used when speaking of "LGBTQ refugees" (which largely is what my colleague and I did in our article).

The various interpretations suggested above can be read as playing on the difference between operating within a realist epistemology and a poststructuralist one. Carbin and Edenheim claim that intersectionality research has failed in understanding the basic premises of poststructuralism, which they suggest is "the fundamental impossibility of accurately representing the world" (2013, p. 243). This is similar to how Spivak formulates her understanding of deconstruction as a mode of practice and critique that interrogates how truths are produced, in stating that "metaphysical enclosures" are unavoidable (Spivak, 1996, pp. 27–28). The question is, what kind of "truths" does these remarks indicate? Spivak points to the importance of suspending judgement, of being alert to the kinds of identification patterns our culture lures us into, but also highlights how we are trapped in the discourses we aim to question, suggesting that we cannot escape metaphysical enclosures. I want to challenge this idea.

When writing about whiteness and homonationalism, the risk of re-centring whiteness is inherent in the work of critique itself, *if* failure is understood as *a priori*, always already part of the problem it seeks to illuminate. If any description of social reality is taken as an *a priori* failure to accurately represent the world, I suggest there is a need to rethink this "axiom" of what descriptions of the social can do, beyond the deconstructive setup of always interrogating the conditions that make a particular representation, category or logic possible. To "stay with the trouble", as Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to do, means to engage with difficulties, but there is also a need to question those epistemic habits that in a *theoreticist* manner, claim a *generality* that instals complicity at the heart of the matter as a constitutive failure.

In discussing what happened in the panel and in our field notes, my colleague highlights the role and voice of queer Arab activists and the expertise they have in relation to questions queer refugees face, suggesting the criticism of how the intersecting imaginary of sexuality, nationhood and gender risk re-centring whiteness. On the other hand, I highlight the panellists' epistemic positions as not only ignorant, "white" and "Finnish", but heteronormative and homonationalist, highlighting the *lack* of expertise the panellists have regarding both queer and brown lives in general and in Finland in particular. What my colleague reacts to is thus a different question than the one I am trying to raise. *We are addressing a similar thematic, but through different questions and emphasis*. When read in this light, analysing a logic of similarities and differences can illuminate how power works, and indeed function as a critical analytic disposition, beyond an ever-present risk of re-centring whiteness. I am not disputing the risk or the habits of re-centring whiteness as such. Rather, I want to problematize the tendency in feminist scholarship to presuppose the risk itself (and to theoretically justify the presupposition) as always already inherent in the problematic engaged with, in order to suggest that a "careful examination of the world as it appears does not imply a capitulation to *the way things are*" (Love, 2017, p. 69).

7. Concluding remarks

How, then, are we to think about the ways in which identities and categories intersect (both in researchers and in the objects of the research), and what their analytical power can be in discussing questions of race, feminist knowledge production, power and politics? These are, as someone reminded me, "mega" questions, but also questions that are important to ask.

I want to suggest that there is a way in which we tend to think about concepts, intersecting categories, language use and descriptions as always exclusionary and inclusionary, as always a matter of power, that is expressive of a particular epistemic habit in feminist scholarship. I have in mind a picture of the social world as a battlefield of meaning, where any description or text is understood as always participating in the power relations it examines.

In this article I have argued that scholars need to be careful not to reinforce the question of the complicity of whiteness as an epistemic habit that in itself reinforces whiteness because of particular theoretical and/or political commitments. Reading intersectionally is suggested as a method against the kind of habitual criticism that has excluded the ways in which race is key to the aims, goals and questions of the field. But, as Hill Collins, Nash, Tomlinson, Carbin and Edenheim, and others have shown, there is no guarantee that intersectionality will not be used exactly in the critical sense that it opposes. What, then, guarantees a non-dismissive, accountable, truly critical approach? I would say nothing does. There are no guarantees in doing critique; what one does is to risk one's judgement (Moi, 2017; Wiegman, 2016). But this does not mean that failure or risks are an inherent part of the work we do, although it might be. The brief example I discussed here illustrates what me and my colleague saw as the other's habitual way of thinking. The exercise of reading the exchange between my co-author and myself highlights how the presuppositions that I began this article with can come to function as epistemic habits, but also suggests that the various epistemic claims in the intersectionality debates need not be understood as so mutually exclusively as they might appear at first glance.

I suggest that the *analytic dispositions* of intersectionality, described as thinking about sameness and difference and their relation to power, and as a theory and praxis that is complicit in the power relations interrogated, constitute theoretisist perspectives on feminist reading and writing practices. Similarly, the suggestion that all arguments are *always already* situated within fields of power risk becoming a totalizing gesture and mode of "representing the world" that has no other justification than that of being a theoretical idea in and of itself. If we let go of the idea that we are trapped in metaphysical enclosures, or that power is *always* present in all feminist practices, Spivak's words can serve as a reminder that "every practice of knowledge production is both a compromise with multiple histories and an insecure venture in an unjust world" (Love, 2017, p. 62), not necessarily a matter of how power is *inherent* in all knowledge production. I suggest that a statement such as "power is inherent in all knowledge production", or the claim that it is fundamentally an impossibility to accurately represent the world, articulate what Toril Moi calls *theoreticism*: "the idea that theoretical correctness somehow guarantees political correctness" (Moi, 1999, p. 59). It suggests that these arguments have political value as critical perspectives in analysing (intersecting) power relations, however the presence of power is *presumed* rather than investigated. As analytic dispositions these remarks function as what Robyn Wiegman calls political imaginaries of the alternative (2016, p. 84) and, I suggest, as generalized statements that risk closing, rather than opening up, possibilities of interpretation.

Taking seriously the intersectional insight that various categories intersect, that power differentials must be read together, suggests that there are different positions, categories and intersections that need to be analysed *case by case*. It is only if we habitually analyse and assume power to work as "always already" a matter of complicity, that the danger of "reiterating what one seeks to contest" becomes a problem, inherent in the very language and descriptions operated with. Therefore being open to a variety of interpretations is pivotal, so as to avoid problematic epistemic habits that as imaginaries of the political, function in ways that foreclose other possibilities of interpretation, understanding, and critically engaging with the world. As Heather Love suggests, "descriptions of the world as it is should not be confused with an endorsement of the status quo" (Love, 2017, p. 53).

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